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TEDE-00 INR-00 IO-00 L-00 NSAE-00 NSCE-00 OIC-02
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FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0120

INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

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RELEASED IN PART
B6, B1, 1.4(D)

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 005956

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/09/2013

TAGS: PHUM, PREL, SY, CN

SUBJECT: SYRIA: HUMAN RIGHTS REFORM NOT POSSIBLE IN CURRENT
ENVIRONMENT

Classified By: CDA GENE CRETZ FOR REASONS 1.5B/D

1. (C) SUMMARY: The SARG's Ministry of Foreign Affairs
discussed Syria's human rights record with Poloff on October
8.

[REDACTED] repeatedly turned the discussion from specific
human rights cases to the recent Israeli raid on Ein Al-Saheb
and the negative effect the raid will have on reform efforts.
End summary.

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2. (U) REQUEST FOR INPUT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT: In August,
through a diplomatic note, the Embassy requested a meeting
with the MFA to solicit the SARG's input on the 2003 Human
Rights Report. The SARG responded to the note on October 7,
two days after the Israeli raid, and requested an immediate
meeting to discuss the report.

3. (U) THE SARG'S APPROACH TO HUMAN RIGHTS [REDACTED] was well
informed regarding individual human rights cases but avoided
discussing them unless pressed. Instead, [REDACTED] focused on the
SARG's overall human rights policy and how it was driven by
external factors. According to [REDACTED] the SARG's human rights
policy is driven by two factors, the conflict with Israel and
the need to fight terrorism. [REDACTED] said that because Israel
occupies Syrian land in the Golan Heights, Syria is in a
state of war, as illustrated by the Ein Al-Saheb attack,
requiring the Syrian people to focus on their "duties" to the
nation rather than on individual rights. The other factor

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEW AUTHORITY: ARCHIE M BOLSTER
CLASSIFICATION: CONFIDENTIAL REASON: 1.4(D)
DECLASSIFY AFTER: 9 OCT 2023
DATE/CASE ID: 21 MAY 2009 200706444

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driving Syria's human rights policy is the need to combat terrorism. [] said Syria is the original victim of terrorism, having fought the Moslem Brotherhood for many years. According to [] these two factors necessitate the continuation of the Emergency Decree, through which the SARG has governed (with no regard for the rule of law), for 40 years. [] also emphasized the positive aspects of SARG's human rights record, including its respect for women's rights and freedom of religion.

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4. (U) IRAQ AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE LIMITS OF WESTERN DEMOCRACY: [] commented that he hoped America's experience in Iraq would show it that American conceptions of human rights and democracy are not feasible outside the West.

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[]'s view was that the problems the US is facing in Iraq are a manifestation of the Iraqi people's rejection of Western democracy. According to [] each culture has its own conception of human rights and good governance and the American model cannot work in the Middle East.

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5. (U) VICTIMS OF ABUSE ARE CRIMINALS: When questioned about individual cases, [] was invariably well informed but defended SARG actions by claiming that the individuals in question had committed crimes. For instance, at one point in the meeting [] said that there was freedom of the press in Syria and Syrian journalists were not subject to harassment. Poloff reminded [] of the December 2002 arrest of Ibrahim Hamidi, the Damascus bureau chief for Al Hayat. [] responded that Hamidi's arrest was not an attack on press freedom because Hamidi had broken the law and had to be punished.

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6. (U) REFORM? IMPOSSIBLE UNDER ISRAELI ATTACK: [] acknowledged that Syria's human rights performance could be better, but changes were not possible while a state of war existed with Israel. [] said that Israel's October 5 attack on Ain Al-Saheb was a pointed reminder of the continuing state of war. He added that President Asad is a reformer, but is unable to act because of the Israeli threat. According to [] the Syrian people accept restrictions on individual freedoms because of this state of war. [] asked, presumably rhetorically, if the US Government considered Israel's recent raid a human rights violation. [] continued with a lengthy denunciation of the US' failure to address the human rights of the "500,000" Syrians driven from their homes in the Golan by Israel.

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7. (U) MAHER ARAR CASE: One of the specific cases discussed was that of Maher Arar, the Canadian-Syria dual national deported by the US to Syria in October 2002 because of his

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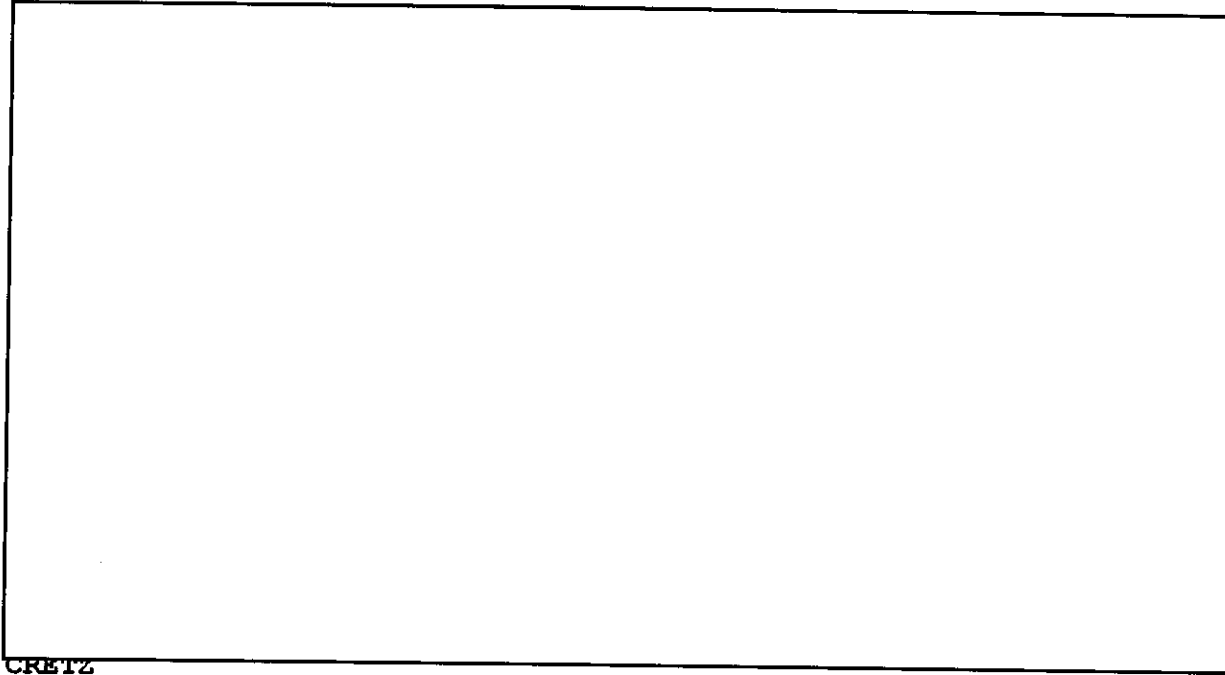
suspected ties to terrorism. Poloff asked [] the reasons for Arar's October 5, 2003, release. [] responded that the SARG had completed its investigation of Arar and found that there was "nothing there". [] asked, not rhetorically, if Poloff thought the SARG's handling of the case would improve Syria's human rights reputation.

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